

The Interdependent Web of All Unitarians

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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Since we adopted our principles in 1985, the “interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part” has been a compelling metaphor to us. It places us within nature, rather than outside it. Rather than a structure with separate parts, a web is a structure that can’t be taken apart without damaging the whole. A web can expand, growing out in all directions.

Today I’d like to talk about another kind of web—a web of connections between Unitarians here and beyond, one that has grown over time and keeps on growing, and one that supports our community here, as we support others.

Phillip Hewett, the unofficial historian of our religious movement, wrote in Unitarians in Canada,

“The Unitarians of Northern Ireland were in festive mood as they gathered in September 15, 1843 . . . members of this body . . . had come together to celebrate not only the ordination of John Corder three days earlier but also the accession of another congregation to their ranks. Before long the reports of the [Remonstrant Synod of Ulster] would begin listing a new presbytery along with the existing ones: the Canada Presbytery, consisting for the present of the congregation in Montreal.”

These two events were part and parcel of one another; the Irish Unitarians sent Corder to serve as the first minister in the Montreal church. From then until 1872, he was to serve the Montreal congregation. Both the British and Foreign Unitarian Association and the American Unitarian Association (the AUA) supported his ministry financially.

Just two years later, John Corder travelled to Toronto to preach two sermons on two consecutive Sundays, out of which came the decision to form a Unitarian church here. The Montreal congregation contributed £100, despite its financial difficulties, to help launch a new congregation in Toronto. The AUA contributed \$100 to help pay the salary of the first

minister here, William Adam. And he was sent almost immediately on a cross-border speaking tour, successfully raising additional American dollars from Boston-area Unitarians.

A hundred years later, the Toronto congregation was thriving (though not without undergoing some tough times through its history). The boomers actually were babies, and the “return to normalcy” after WWII included church attendance. Our congregation, like many in Canada and the US, had a strongly humanist and individualist direction, which was attractive to many people in a period of economic prosperity, scientific interest, and social change. As the congregation—and the religious education program—grew beyond the capacity of our building, we began to spin off new congregations in other parts of Toronto. At one time, we had spun off as many as five functioning congregations. And in the late 90s, we again helped establish a new congregation, this time in the Beaches.

We’re lucky in Toronto, and indeed in Southern Ontario, to have several congregations, each with a different “personality”, in relatively close proximity. It lets us share things like the Choral Extravaganza last year, when the choirs from six or seven congregations got together to learn together and then to present a concert that exhilarated all of us.

But our Unitarian web goes well beyond Toronto. As a member of the Canadian Unitarian Council (the CUC), we have a connection to each of the other congregations across Canada—fifty of them, some with memberships below fifty and others with over 500 members. Together we are able to do things that would be out of reach for single congregations.

We can share resources—

- Religious educators share programs and ways of working with children and youth. OWL—Our Whole Life--, Spirit Play, Coming of Age, and other programs enrich our congregations, and draw on the creativity of our staff and volunteers.
- The Northern Lights Chalice Lighters program will enable congregations to undertake significant projects, with the support of fellow Unitarians from across Canada.
- The CUC staff and volunteers organise leadership training for groups of congregations. Two of our members attended CUUL school last year, and were inspired by the opportunity.
- This year the CUC is planning a symposium that will focus on

spiritual leadership that lives the values expressed by our seven principles and explores how spiritual leadership helps us find meaning in our lives.

Coming together in focused programs or more general ones, we meet new people, exchange ideas, and get new inspiration for the work we are doing in our own congregations.

We can act to change the world—

- Starting with the Guelph congregation, Unitarians across Southern Ontario were mobilised to Stop the Quarry this past year., and our national body supported the action with the requisite “letter from the President”.
- The CUC was an intervenor in the British Columbia Supreme Court case last December supporting assistance in dying for the terminally ill.
- Elaine Harvey represented Unitarians and chaired the Faith Based Caucus at the United Nations during the debates leading to the adoption of a statute for the creation of an International Criminal Court, as part of our work with the UU United Nations Office. The UU UNO is currently taking a leadership role in UN efforts for LGBT rights.

But our web doesn't stop at our national borders. In February Bruce Schwartzentruber and I attended the meeting of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists in the Philippines.

When ICUU was organised in 1995, occasional correspondence would come in to the UUA, the British General Assembly, or, once in a great while, the CUC, from someone in a new place, looking for information about our faith. The emergence of an international body came at the same time as the Internet began to take hold, and it has led to the establishment of new groups in Africa, in Indonesia, and most recently in Hong Kong. What was mainly a North American and European group, with small representations from the Philippines and India, has become a much more diverse gathering.

This was apparent in the morning and evening worship times, when representatives of different countries shared their own styles with us. Francisco Lagunes Gaitan, from Mexico, ended his service with a “chocolate communion.” In the service planned by the two delegates from Kenya, we ended with all of us dancing in two circles, moving in opposite directions,

greeting one another as we passed. And in the service many of us attended in a Manila barrio, we were touched as the children recited “the eight principles of Unitarian Universalism” in their own language. Their first principle is “There is only one God who is the God of love.” (You can experience some of that service by visiting the website UU Without Borders, and clicking on 2012, “Inspired by the children of Manila.”)

As we get to know one another around the world, we learn each others’ stories. In the Philippines, the story begins with Toribio Quimada, raised in the Catholic faith, who later became active in a Protestant group where for the first time he read the Bible for himself. He became a leader in the church. By chance in 1951 he discovered references to Universalism, and wrote to a Universalist church in the United States, through which he made contact with the Universalist Service Committee. Through his correspondence with them, he developed a Universalist theology, and in 1954, he and the 14 congregations he was serving left the Protestant group and began developing the Universalist Church of the Philippines, later to become the UU Church of the Philippines. Later his ministry took a new direction: social activism and land reform. This set him against wealthy landowners in the area and the government. On May 23, 1988, Rev. Quimada was shot and his house burned because of his activism. The UU Church of the Philippines today is led by his daughter, Rev. Rebecca Siennes, a strong leader who spent several years at Meadville-Lombard Theological Seminary.

The web in which we live today is very different from the one 150 years ago. Indeed, those pioneers who established the Montreal and Toronto congregations more than 150 years ago would have a hard time recognising us today. And the web that is developing now will not look like our present one. Today most of the work of the CUC is done “on line”—using that other web that is so much a part of our modern life. Peter Morales, the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association in the United States, has suggested that we need to look beyond congregations as a way of working with people. He writes,

“ . . . I am realizing in a profound way that congregations cannot be the only way we connect with people. We have always seen ourselves as a faith, as part of an international religious movement . . . We have long defined ourselves as an association of congregations. We need to think of ourselves as a religious movement. The difference is potentially huge. . . The future

relevance of our faith may well depend on whether we can create a religious movement beyond, as well as within, the parish.”

For all of us here, our local congregation is in the centre of our web. This is the place where our connections are closest, where we have watched our children grow up, lived through shared sorrows and joys, developed deep and lasting friendships. But we are also part of a wider web... We belong not only to First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, but we are also connected to the tiny UU congregation on Salt Spring Island and the large one in Ottawa. We have a connection to the children in the barrio in Manila, and to the Unitarians seeking our support in Uganda, where to be gay can be a death sentence, and to the Unitarians in Transylvania, who have been caring for our heritage of religious freedom for four hundred years.

We are a part of the interdependent web of all Unitarians.